Claims:

1.   A method of implementing a control channel for
      exchanging information between switching devices in a
      packet switched communications network, comprising:
      selecting an unused portion of a packet format used
      for communicating between switching devices; and
      embedding control information in the unused portion.

2.   The method as defined in claim 1 wherein said
      communications network is an Ethernet network.

3.   The method as defined in claim 2 wherein said Ethernet
      network is a Gigabit Ethernet network.

4.   The method as defined in claim 3 wherein said unused
      portion is in an eight octet preamble frame.

5.   The method as defined in claim 4 wherein said a third
      octet of said preamble frame contains a special code
      to signify that following frames contain control
      information.

6.   The method as defined in claim 5 wherein said control
      information is embedded in three octets following said
      third octet,

7.   The method as defined in claim 6 wherein said three
      octets having embedded control information have a
      distinctive, high order bit.

8.   The method as defined in claim 1 wherein said
      switching devices are managed as a group of switches
      in a clustered arrangement.

9.   The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control
      information relates to disable and enable flow
      control.

10. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control
    information relates to transmission priority of
    packets between switching devices.

11. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control
    information relates to results of a hash algorithm
    implemented as between ports within said cluster.

12. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control
    information relates to ports making up a mirrored pair
    involving a switch cluster.

13. The method as defined in claim 8 wherein said control
    information relates to multicast packet protocols
    distributed to cluster switches within said network.

14. A system for implementing a control channel for use in
    exchanging information between switching devices in a
    packet switched communications network, comprising:
    means to select an unused portion of a packet format
    used to carry communication between switching devices;
    and
    means to embed control information in the unused
    portion.

15. The method as defined in claim 14 wherein said
    communications network is the Ethernet.

16. The method as defined in claim 14 wherein said
    communications network is a Gigabit Ethernet.